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ABSTRACT

The crucial question of who should become English teachers may be answered by defining what high school and college English teachers should focus on in the classroom. As teachers of communication, English teachers should aid their students in understanding and appreciating the ideas of the past and in forming and articulating concepts for the future. They should also demonstrate their aesthetic enjoyment of literature, directing their students in learning to discriminate among literary works and to analyze various kinds of literature. (JM)

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# Who Should Be English Teachers?

Since Plato banished the poet from his ideal republic, literature has been regarded with suspicion. Though perhaps the most vociferous attacks came from the early church fathers and the Puritanic moralists of the English Renaissance, the utility of literary studies and their moral implications continue to be questioned. With the modern industrial world's emphasis on vocational education further exaggerated by economic recession and unemployment, the value of understanding a Shakespearean sonnet may be difficult to sell a school board member or a college regent. What the public official demands is not aesthetic appreciation but the development of a skill, which to him typically means learning how to use proper grammar and to spell correctly or how to write a business letter. Coupled with the thrust of vocationalism is the emphasis on relevance, which is too often narrowly interpreted as relevance to immediate social problems. The effect is to concentrate on only the most topical and most recent works and to reduce literature to propaganda.

Further, the pressure of the scalpel-wielding administrator who is seeking to trim the budget of all but essential functions may find a course in metaphysical poetry or the contemporary novel an easy place to cut. The growing belief among students and their parents that the study of literature will not help them to get jobs, or that it deals with dead issues, has reduced the enrollment in English courses by from ten to forty per cent in most colleges and universities and is, no doubt, reducing high school enrollments as well. The response to the shrinking

enrollments has been at the University of Nebraska and other places the adoption of popular culture courses, such as "rock lyrics" or the "policeman as hero in contemporary fiction," and the desire to attract students has apparently contributed to the grade inflation that is sweeping the country. When effectiveness is measured by credit hours produced and function is evaluated in terms of the market place, the question as to who should be English teachers becomes extremely critical.

But how can we recruit the best candidates for the profession when the number of teaching positions is shrinking, as the economy worsens, and the future promises a continuing decline in enrollment at the high school and college levels? Can we in good conscience encourage a promising student to take up a profession that may not provide him a livelihood? Some of our best candidates who a few years ago would have entered our profession are now going into law, journalism, or business, for the better pay and the brighter prospects for employment. We are in danger of ending up with a majority of students who become English majors by default after finding other subjects too demanding and become English teachers because other professional opportunities are not open to them. Since only a few students enter college with the goal of becoming English teachers--I am told that less than 1% of incoming freshman at the University of Nebraska identify English teaching as their career objective--and since most decided on English as a major in their second year or later, we must look carefully at their reasons for taking up the major and their qualifications for teaching English. Our assessment of who is to teach depends on what is to be taught, and on these judgments rest not only the strength of our profession but also the nature of our influence on the future of our

society. We must attract the very best candidates to our profession, but we must first decide what the bases for our selection should be.

We must recognize at the beginning that a teacher is a model for his students at every level of education from kindergarten to graduate school, and we are, whether we like it or not, living examples of what we teach. This is important not only for attracting potential teachers but also for instructing them, and in turn we must consider what kind of models our future teachers will be when they enter their own classrooms. That is, we must as teachers of teachers exemplify the qualities and values we expect our students to pass on to their students. What exactly those qualities and values should be is more difficult to determine. When I asked a colleague who spent last semester as an exchange teacher at one of the local high schools what an English teacher should be, he answered, "a high school teacher must first of all be loving, but it helps if he is also bright." Perhaps we might disagree with the order of his priorities, but I think we can agree that a sincere interest in the students' welfare and native intelligence are primary requirements for effective teaching. However, what distinguishes an English teacher from other teachers are his attitudes and goals, and these are not only most subject to change but are also most readily transmitted to his students.

The attitude a teacher has toward his subject matter is perhaps most important. Most of us probably entered our profession because we got hooked on reading as kids and because we had ambitions to become Mark Twains or Jane Austens ourselves. We may find that our talent is not deep enough or our motivation not strong enough to devote our lives to authorship, but our romance with the written word burns, if more dimly,

by daily contact with the works of others. This love of literature is something that we may take for granted, but if it is absent in the teachers we train, no amount of intelligence or genuine concern for students will compensate for its loss. When literature becomes simply a tool for the practice of composition, both the words read and the words written are dead things. Quintilian in his Institutes warns, "Unless the foundations of oratory [the Roman equivalent of composition] are well and truly laid by the teaching of literature, the superstructure will collapse. The study of literature is a necessity for boys and the delight of old age, the sweet companion of our privacy and the sole branch of study which has more solid substance than display."[1] Quintilian indicates that literature offers instructive examples of the best writing, but it also offers enjoyment to every age and provides inspiration when motivation flags. However, the inspiration of the student quickly ebbs when his teacher responds mechanically or worse yet antagonistically to the poem or novel being studied. Unforgiveable is the teacher who sneers at Emily Dickinson's repressed sensitivity or laughs at Hemingway's machismo. Every work introduced into the classroom deserves to be treated respectfully, even as its faults are considered. A prospective teacher who has no feeling for the literature he handles will not be able to convince his future students that English is a subject that merits study.

This does not mean, of course, that our prospective teachers should enthusiastically endorse all that appears in print. Rather they must discriminate between those works which primarily provide diversion and those which offer a meaningful reading experience. It may be well to quicken a reluctant student's interest in reading by directing him to

science fiction or detective stories, but not to progress beyond this form of entertainment is like leaving a budding pianist playing scales. A student must be led to understand and appreciate Brahms, and he must also be led to understand and appreciate George Eliot. However, if his teacher cannot perceive or ignores the difference between the Rolling Stones and Brahms or between Isaac Asimov and George Eliot, the student remains a culturally deprived child. Perhaps I am needlessly laboring a point that is obvious to us all, but the present trend in our profession to orient our courses to student desires involves a heavy responsibility for the teacher. As Charles Silberman in Crisis in the Classroom points out, "the teacher . . . must do more than simply start where his students are; he must also take them somewhere else. To do that, he must have some convictions about where they should go, convictions, that is to say, about what is worth learning."[2] Where our prospective English teachers take their students--"what is worth learning"--depends on the convictions we as their teachers help to shape.

If a candidate for the teaching profession demonstrates both an abiding love for the written word and discrimination about the literature that is taught, we must still determine how he discriminates and why he believes literature should be studied. His love of literature probably stems from the aesthetic experience that literature offers. Donne's "Extasie" or Keats's "St. Agnes Eve" demands the reader's participation in an experience that enlarges and enriches his inner life, and Shakespeare's Hamlet or Shaw's Pygmalion creates an imaginative world which the reader is invited both to share and to judge. Literature on ts

primary level is an exercise in the imagination that evokes emotions that may be pleasant or painful, but ultimately it satisfies our thirst for experience. The aesthetic experience provides a controlled involvement that may excite as it provides insight into living. Literature thus offers a means to encounter many more situations, characters, and mental states than our daily lives make possible. This immediate aesthetic experience, Kant and Schiller argued, is literature's reason for being. It is unnecessary in their view to defend poetry on moral or utilitarian grounds as earlier writers had done. This liberation of literature from an ulterior purpose was, as we all know, embraced by the Romantic movement and led ultimately to the "art for art's sake" doctrine in the later nineteenth century. And, as O. B. Hardison, Jr., has pointed out, the goal of internal development of the individual in the Summerhill and Montessori educational philosophies is basically an extension of the Romantic aesthetic theory.[3] Since much recent educational reform appears to endorse individualized and internalized development and eschews external measures or expectations, the primacy of the aesthetic experience is reinforced. As a result, the aesthetic experience threatens to become so magnified and so personalized as to inhibit analysis or articulation.

However, our prospective teacher must recognize and transmit to his students the need to investigate both how and why the aesthetic experience is achieved. In other words, he must intellectualize the experience by examining the artifact. Not many years ago most courses in literature were courses in literary history as English literature was traditionally surveyed in two semesters. Many works were represented

only by snippets of the whole. Paradise Lost, for example, was commonly considered only in terms of selected passages from Books I, II, IX, and XII. However, as "great books" and genre courses became more popular, the focus on individual works increased as historical contexts were often either quickly dismissed or ignored altogether. With the methodology of "New" criticism both str .re and prosody received more careful examination than they had earlier been given, but these investigations often turned out to be disturbingly subjective as patterns of imagery were selected and then used as the bases for interpretative argument. We are all aware of the widely disparate results in poetic criticism, but perhaps the fruits of such scholarship are best demonstrated in studies of Shakespeare, where one set of images is used to prove that Hamlet has an Oedipal complex and another that Hamlet is a homosexual. Such exercises in ingenuity have led to discrediting analysis as a part of the literary response and have reinforced the personalization of the aesthetic experience. This can result in denying measurements for evaluating either the literature itself or the individual's response to it as the intellectual dimension is left unexplored. The articulation of a response under these circumstances inevitably turns out to be impressionistic. Our prospective teachers must be armed both with the conviction and with the critical tools to counter this solipsistic escape, and they must be able to demonstrate the greater satisfaction to be achieved by analyzing how a work of literature is put together, how a reader's response is manipulated by the writer, or why certain works are more successful than others. Students' appreciation of literature is enhanced by their understanding of the components that make up the work, and their ability to discriminate among the poems or novels that they read is best developed by

comparative analyses. Exercise of the intellect is as important to the literary experience as exercise of the imagination.

The intellectual response depends upon understanding the form of the poem or novel read, but it also evokes a judgment of the ideas and values that underlie the experience created in the work. The candidate whom we welcome into our profession must not only respect the purpose of the author but also encourage an evaluation of the ideas and actions represented in the work. He must be careful not to select only writers whose values he shares and not to impose his own values on a work that does not embody them. In other words, a teacher should avoid the role of an advocate for a social or political doctrine. To select only poems that decry patriotism or that celebrate cultural elitism is an illegitimate use of a teacher's authority; and it is equally unwarranted for a teacher to represent Dickens' novels as demonstrations of social injustice that inevitably must lead one to embrace socialism. When literature is reduced to propaganda or the teacher adopts the role of a crusader for a social or political cause, the teaching of English becomes subject to citizens' pressures that can only end in restrictive measures imposed on teachers from the outside. We all know of instances of this kind which have provoked citizen manipulation of curricula, book-burnings, and dismissals. Perhaps the present social climate is not so conducive to the zeal that sparked confrontations in the past, but we must be aware of our responsibilities to the literature we teach as well as to the society we serve. The effects of literature on the behavior of those who read it have long been in dispute. Stephen Gosson warned in 1579 that the "wanton speache" of poets "whet[s] desire too inordinate lust,

while Thomas Nashe claimed in 1592 that the poets "cleansed our language from barbarisme" and "the virtuous by their praises they encourage to be more vertuous."[5] Though we must agree with Nashe that literature is a force for good, we must not give Gosson's descendants among us grounds for questioning our integrity.

Finally, the new members of our profession must be committee to improving their students' skills in communiction. Criticism from parents and employers that we do not teach our students to spell or to write "correct" English is so familiar to most of us that we may no longer heed it, but before we dismiss it as demands for only the superficial aspects of communication, we should recognize that a large number of our present students are failing to measure up to the expectations of our society. Another indication of the gap between traditional standards of judgment and our students' performance is the falling scores in the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests--from 178,000 in 1966-67 to 134,000 in 1973-74--and an increasing number of students are being placed in remedial composition courses in many colleges and universities. Perhaps the media revolution with its emphasis on viewing and listening can be blamed in part for this lowering of composition skills, but in the eyes of many citizens' groups and administrators we are not doing our job. Unless we want these people to wrest control of our curricula from us, we must respond by emphasizing writing even more than we have in the past. Reading student essays may be an onerous task, but practice is essential to improving a skill whether it is playing the piano or writing paragraphs. Exercises in composition not only improve a student's facility in communication, but they also aid his perception by forcing him >

define his ideas and to sharpen his insights. The current fashion of having students keep a journal may be a useful step in helping them to clarify their thoughts, but communication means expressing oneself to others. Journal-keeping is a private activity, while most writing we do throughout our lives, whether in the form of letters, reports, or essays, is addressed to a specific audience, not ourselves. It is necessary, therefore, that students be made aware of language usage expected from the different audiences to whom they direct their words. Students deserve constructive but careful criticism of their writing, for their future success will depend in large part on their skill in communicating with others.

The art of communication has been celebrated at least since Homer composed his epics, but never has it been more important than it is now. Though our society may be seeking its models elsewhere, the poet, as Sir Philip Sidney reminds us, is the master of communication, "for he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it . . . with a tale, forsooth, [the poet] cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner."[6] A teacher of English is most essentially a teacher of communication; he must aid his students in understanding and appreciating the best that has been thought and expressed in the past, and in forming and articulating the ideas of the future. The candidates we select to enter our profession must be guardians of our literary heritage and promoters of eloquence in a world that is becoming increasingly alien to the human spirit. We must recruit future teachers who are not only bright and "loving" to their students, but who also love literature

and believe it is an aesthetic and intellectual experience to be communicated to others.

NOTES

[1]Institutio Oratoria, trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1921), I.i.65. (Loeb)

[2](New York: Random House, 1970), p. 334.

[3]Toward Freedom and Dignity, The Humanities and The Idea of Humanity (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), pp. 94-95.

[4]The Schoole of Abuse (London, 1579), p. 14.

[5]Pierce Pennilesse his Supplication to the Devil (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), pp. 58ff.

[6]The Defence of Poesy in Selected Prose and Poetry, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1969), pp. 123-124.